Pierre Bourdieu: Episteme, Polity and Critique

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Introduction

1.1 This volume is a collective attempt to present various ways of critically engaging with Bourdieu's work. It comes at a time where the social sciences might be subject to serious change. The polemics between social determination and humanist sublimation of the individual, closely associated with Bourdieu in France, is now rather obsolete and has been so for some time. The importance of social conditions for human action and conscience is not in doubt. What is now in doubt is at how many levels those conditions shape human existence, not only via individual experience but via collective coexistence too. We seem to be in the beginning of a social science revolution but sociology has for the most part resorted to a strategy of negation. It refuses to acknowledge the changes, thus losing ground to simplistic, a-cultural sociobiological explanatory theses; but soon these theses will become more sophisticated and are likely to give rise to a new social science paradigm that might marginalise critical sociological study for long.

1.2 This is a time when Bourdieu's work should inspire us towards maintaining sociological complexity whilst we integrate at the same time all available knowledge. Sociology, for Bourdieu, was not a mere critical discourse but a scientific approach to human coexistence; an approach which should reveal the ways in which social, economic and cultural conditions operate to produce stratified groups and societies. It is not a coincidence that Bourdieu devoted his last series of lectures at the *Collège de France* to the "sociology of the scientific field and reflexivity" and his very last lecture to applying his science on himself. In that lecture he declared: "I am attached to the rationalist tradition and I do not wish to participate in the destruction of science"[1]. To show how inseparable critique and science are, Bourdieu liked to quote Bachelard's contention that "science starts with inverted commas'. For Bourdieu, critique had no end but it was neither arbitrary nor self-referential; it should be built on robust research and directed towards demonstrating the function of society to its participants.

1.3 Bourdieu's contribution is in that sense deeply epistemological. It may be that contemporary stratification is not the same as in the 1960s, when Passeron and Bourdieu wrote *The Inheritors*. Middle class belonging also seems much less a matter of *Distinction* today and increasingly a matter of individual capacity to benefit from the institutional and organisational web that surrounds postindustrial citizens. Despite this, there is another level at which Bourdieu's approach will always remain relevant: that of combining *episteme* and *polity* into one critical edifice. Passeron explains in his contribution to this issue why those who wanted the one without the other always brushed out half of the arguments and conclusions produced by the research that he conducted with Bourdieu. There is a lesson to be drawn from that eclecticism: we often tend to disregard those parts of knowledge which resist our interpretation of the social world. As the old ironic adage goes "if reality disagrees with our ideas, that's too bad for reality". Opening ourselves to every means that research can supply is neither miasma nor luxury. It is a scientific obligation and an epistemological necessity if we are ever to endow the critical study of society with a different status; a status which will enable it to increase its currently negligible influence in the process of social and political change.

The contributions

2.1 We did not intend to compile either a eulogy or a polemics. The purpose of this issue is to show that a leading, highly accessible journal like *Sociological Research Online* can host a multifaceted demonstration of how Bourdieu's work can be useful. Some contributions engage directly with Bourdieu's themes while others show its far-reaching impact. In both cases, Bourdieu is present via his own distinctive sociological practice, largely built on his capacity to interweave theoretical questions with empirical research into a critical total.

2.2 *Passeron* looks at the legacy of *The Inheritors* and *Reproduction* up to the 1980s. He opens his article with the effort that he and Bourdieu made to "free themselves" at the time from the philosophical,

humanistic and rhetorical tradition of the French educational elite, to which they belonged as students of the "Ecole Normale Supérieure de Paris". Empirical work was still not well regarded in early 1950s France and carrying out proper sociological studies and surveys was not the obvious way of thinking on society, even fifty five years after Durkheim's *Suicide*; a post-durkheimian model was accordingly rather hard to envisage. A serious foundation that allowed Bourdieu and Passeron to build on the relation between qualitative and quantitative research, and place that relation in a theoretical context, was Simiand's work and even more so, that of Maurice Halbwachs; Hoggart, Bernstein, Goffman, Strauss and others gave them insights and stimulation that could not have come from France.

2.3 Loyal to the spirit of his theme, Passeron relates at the same time the intersection of personal histories and research angles since Bourdieu and himself were both products of the "Republican School"[2] and the social mobility associated with it; explaining one's individual course has certainly been the motivation behind many sociological works. Bourdieu and Passeron crossed that motivation with a persistent effort to learn as much as they could. Few of their French colleagues at the time would have turned as much to class literature, to the seminal Robbins report on British education and to refining their knowledge of statistics. The calculation of probabilities in class trajectories was of special interest to both authors of *The Inheritors* who used an algorithm proposed by Darbel in their book. Moving from a simplistic conception of percentages of class representation in education to "objective probabilities" in statistical terms was a major step in Passeron's view.

2.4 Passeron goes on to explain how the two books were received. He sees clearly how *The Inheritors* was used by all critical stakeholders and how the 1968 movement essentially used the message of the book partially and superficially. Conservative commentators expectedly rejected the suggestions but left-wing political parties and student unions also tried to suppress its critical content on cultural transmission and reduce it to a mere economic problem of income inequalities, whilst Raymond Aron based his critique on Pareto's positivist arguments on social mobility. All discourses against the "system", educational and otherwise, produced distorted rewritings of *The Inheritors* and *Reproduction*, and it is from these "propagandist rewritings", rather than from reading the books, that the general public got its perception of what the two books were about. Passeron remarks that "[…] in the main, the debate on the scientific merits of *The Inheritors* (and even more so of the *Reproduction*) has always been more ideological than scientific". The constant misunderstanding of readers interpreting what they read to fit their own views and expectations is both inevitable and instrumental in generating ideological consensus.

2.5 Sociologist to the bone, Passeron also notes one of the deepest political, albeit individualised, consequences of *The Inheritors*: "To my great amazement, the letters that I received in the months after the publication of *The Inheritors* mainly came from anonymous "grant-holders" or intellectuals whom I had known during their studies. Both were perfectly rehearsed in French educational culture but both experienced nonetheless an emotional "deliverance" in their relief at seeing the sociological banality of their modest social origin described and neutralised. At the time, that origin made them feel "ashamed" or uneasy because of the humble jobs of their father or their mother that they often kept secret from their fellow students".

2.6 In sociology, however, the two books have left a lasting conceptual legacy, all the more penetrating since its use has become implicit. Passeron organises this legacy around four main areas: thinking of "cultural heritage" as the first explanatory factor in surveys that deal with scholastic attainment; the method of calculating the likelihood of scholastic attainment by belonging to a specific category of social origin; the notion of "cultural capital", despite its breadth and the difficulties that may be faced in operationalising it each time; finally, the long-lasting effect of the descriptions and suggestions in terms of pedagogy, mainly made in *The Inheritors*, and the doubts cast over the democratisation of admission into the French education system.

2.7 *Sullivan* makes a significant contribution to updating the problematics and use of cultural capital as a sociological conceptual tool, particularly as part of educational attainment. One can easily suggest that 'traditional' forms of cultural capital, such as knowledge of the fine arts, tend to become increasingly obsolete. But the real question is: do new forms of cultural capital replace the older ones and, if so, do these new forms lead to the same stratifying consequences as the older ones? At the same time, is the transmission of such forms as possible as it previously was, or do these forms lose their 'reproductive value' much more rapidly? Answering these questions is closely linked to understanding the informal, implicit 'rules of the game', whose use leads to success and whose ignorance leads to failure. Bourdieu and Passeron explained the determining significance of that implicitness but, as Sullivan explains, the nature of the game as it stands today may complicate this aspect of intergenerational cultural transmission. Sullivan incisively notes that " 'popular culture' for one generation can gain obscurity and exclusivity for later generations". It is therefore not surprising that she rejects mere cyclicity in cultural transmission, but without denying that "whatever abilities the education system decided to reward, the privileged classes would be advantaged in developing those abilities in their children." In addition, it is by definition the middle classes that determine which abilities the system will reward. It is therefore increasingly doubtful if 'learned' and 'cultured' identities and self-presentations will resist the discursive pressure of 'proactive' attitudes and performance indicators, since these increasingly formulate the criteria of socioeconomic attainment.

2.8 Sullivan uses knowledge of a "wider, dominant culture" to elicit meaning from polarised data. The middle classes keep their advantage when it comes to transmitting knowledge and information that is not conveyed to all by the mass media; but this advantage is meaningful only inasmuch as educational attainment and social stratification systems reward it. Still more complicated is the issue of the justification of the subjects, fields and objectives of any educational system, for, as Sullivan argues, the fact that these contribute to class reproduction does not mean that they are arbitrary, a point that takes discussion on the cultural aspects of class reproduction one step further. In fact, cultural capital is about

implicit mechanisms concerning socially significant objectives. Whether this condition merely reflects hegemony or represents some "genuine" aspect of human coexistence is a matter for future debate, but there is little doubt that this level of observation adds further complexity to Bourdieu's problematics and analyses; from a different point of view it also simplifies them, because the issue of the social determination of the individual, a pivotal theme for Bourdieu and many of his critics, is being resolved at an earlier stage. Namely, if the cultural mechanisms of transmitting social advantages are themselves subject to meaningful social constraints, there remains not much ground to argue against the importance of the social environment in determining individual trajectories.

2.9 *Verweij* undertakes a major challenge in trying to critically integrate three important contributions to the understanding of sociality and sociocultural change. Douglas's and Thompson's 'cultural theory', Fiske's 'relational models' and Bourdieu's 'theory of practice', all address the cyclical process of differentiation and change that is kept in motion through culture. Verweij's ambitious objective is to propose the outline of "a theory of constrained relativism". His introductory perspicacious point is that all four theorists that he has chosen to discuss have worked by combining elements from all sides of historical social science divisions and dichotomies. This allows for a meaningful and discerning angle from which works in the theories can be seen to put forward common theses against the traditional sociological dilemmas such as the dilemma between 'objective' social reality and its 'subjective' interpretations, or the distinction between collective coexistence and individual behaviour as sources of society. Verweij addresses in the same terms the fundamental dichotomy between social determination and individual autonomy. Humanist polemics was directed against Bourdieu, mainly in France, on the grounds of that distinction in order to salvage the individual as a freely thinking and freely acting subject. Verweij skilfully shows that Bourdieu's social determinism was not monolithic, just as it is the case for the other theorists; furthermore, he convincingly argues that social change has not dazzled the theories that he discusses and that their angle on distinctions between types of society is determined by the permanent sociocultural shaping of individuals and groups, an angle which addresses the depth of social coexistence without surrendering to naïve universalist positions. Cultural complexity is thus reflected in the theories because culture is seen as an edifice of diverse and often conflicting parts while at the same time it constrains these parts via their belonging to the edifice. This is an excellent basis, Verweij argues, for understanding how "[…] these authors are able to reconcile a functionalist account with the assumption that social life is essentially antagonistic. Rather than assuming that the whole of society is dominated by a single way of organising and interpreting (as was often the case in previous social theories […]), the authors assume that social situations typically comprise several antagonistic groups of actors adhering to rivalling ways of organising and perceiving."

2.10 Although Bourdieu could be criticised for not developing a typology to represent the forces of social change, the main weakness that Verweij sees in his works is his reduction of all possible individual attributes (e.g. creativity, initiative) to means and consequences of domination: "in thus truncating social life to the struggle between alternative forms of repressive hierarchy, Bourdieu is unable both to recognise the possible useful functions that hierarchical ways of organising may have to fulfil in a peaceful, democratic and plural society and to explore the disadvantages and weaknesses of non-hierarchical forms of organising." The article proceeds to explore the weaknesses of the two other theories, focusing particularly on the conceptual effectiveness of their main typologies, and then addresses a series of considerable strengths. Verweij rightly points out that Bourdieu's theoretical framework is the only one to have been applied to entire social fields, an ambitious undertaking that should inspire similar efforts by those who work in "cultural theory" and relational models. It is possible, concludes Verweij, to integrate the strengths of the three theories into a 'cumulative' theoretical framework built around the notion of "constrained relativism", a bold and useful proposition whose benefits for the social sciences seem clear and immediate.

2.11 *Papilloud* deals with the reception of Bourdieu's work in Germany. It is a major investigative and conceptual challenge to understand how works that have had considerable influence in their original national environment are integrated into other traditions of thought and inquiry. Papilloud meticulously unravels the thread of projections, preferences and misunderstandings that reconstruct Bourdieu's work according to the German social science context, albeit without doing away with Bourdieu's main themes and conclusions. "Distinction" and "agent", two concepts at the centre of Bourdieu's conceptual methodology are translated into German by the terms *Unterschied* and *Akteur* in ways that respectively erode the significance that Bourdieu attributed to social change and social structure. Other terms, such as "corps", "hexis" or "habitus" give rise to similar trade-offs between immediate meaning and overarching conceptual coherence. To demonstrate how these trade-offs operate, Papilloud addresses with great precision the effect of the German transposition of the concepts of "agent" and "distinction"; he shows how the two German concepts lead to dissonance and at the same time undermine the priority of the symbolic over the physical, a fundamental characteristic of Bourdieu's conceptual edifice. The paradox is effective in practice but strong nonetheless: "[…] by translating Bourdieu *agent* into *akteur*, one allows the German reader to understand what Bourdieu means but one also makes Bourdieu say the exact opposite of what he has said in French."

2.12 Bourdieu, Papilloud goes on to argue, conceives the transition to modernity also at the level of the changing content of distinguishing practices that shift from physical matter to relational symbol; because Bourdieu's analyses are not merely "relational" but "relationist", in the sense that all habitus are part of a coherent universe of interdependency, it is practically impossible to communicate Bourdieu's vision of 'distinction' within the German social science context. A broader critique arises from this tension, concludes Papilloud, since it is important to understand all practices and schemes of social differentiation as changes in social control processes that modify the social bond.

2.13 *Mouzelis* puts forward a very interesting case, namely the idea that Bourdieu's theory of practice does not go far enough in considering the interactivity of social games and remains too functionalist or

deterministic as a result. Mouzelis uses football as an example to argue that "rational and/or reflexive calculation does not appear, as Bourdieu maintains, only when there is a lack of fit between dispositions and positions" and details other conditions in which that calculation arises; it is Bourdieu's emphasis on the pre-reflexive nature of the habitus that has probably led him, Mouzelis thinks, to overlook types of reflexivity that are features of everyday situations. It is an excellent point that late modern reflexivity seems to be of a more "negative" nature, more akin to a resource for suppressing problems in personal motivation than to a reaction in conditions of crisis. Mouzelis convincingly explains Bourdieu's focus on the exceptional character of reflexivity and rational calculation as part of his overarching theoretical priorities: "the reason Bourdieu has conceptualized strategies in a way that does not entail rational calculation and reflexivity has less to do with the rarity of rational strategizing than with his attempt to "transcend" the objectivist-subjectivist divide"; those familiar with Bourdieu know how essential that conceptual priority was in his work. Mouzelis ends his paper with a proposal to redress the balance via a theoretical scheme that leaves a broader margin for considering reflexivity and rationality in social interaction.

2.14 *Hobsbawm* deals with Bourdieu's relation to social history and makes the same point as Passeron to show how he reads Bourdieu in a mode of parallel soliloquies: "We read our own interests into an author, not his". Bourdieu was always at ease with history and social historians but he resolutely became a philosopher-turned-sociologist who rarely cited historians in his works. Despite his support to Braudel, Bourdieu was critical of the Annales school and their "longue durée" approach. Hobsbawm goes on to point out that unlike other well-known French thinkers, such as Foucault, Althusser or Derrida, Bourdieu possessed the curiosity and the gift of a historian and he could have become one if he so wished. He was also in constant dialogue with the past, deeply conscious that it permeates the present and needs to be reflexively investigated if the present is to be at all understood. Hobsbawm quotes Bourdieu's powerful formula that "It is by discovering its own historicity that reason acquires the means to break free from history".

2.15 Bourdieu's concept of the "field" is central to his attempts at unifying the social analysis of the past and the present into one continuous line. Hobsbawm suggests that there are limits to such an approach: "While Bourdieu's model of 'fields of struggle' and his methods are applicable to any situation, it was designed for other historical questions. It is therefore only of limited relevance. It was not designed to explain either of the two central experiences of human history, the 'neolithic revolution' which transformed humanity from a species of hunter-gatherers into one of cultivators, and the industrial revolution which is still transforming our globe." But for Hobsbawm, Bourdieu remains nonetheless a master of historical insight in his sociological analyses, a social scientist acutely conscious of the processes of social transformation. Hobsbawm points out that Bourdieu's understanding of domination is a major contribution to critical social history but regrets his choice of the term "symbolic violence" to illustrate stratified power that stems out of an established order. Finally, Hobsbawm suggests that Bourdieu's commitment to the wilful production of social reality is at the same time the foundation and the objective of his analyses.

2.16 *Douglas*'s "nostalgic return" to Lévy-Bruhl is a bold exploration of what is probably the most sensitive anthropological distinction, that of the "analytic" and the "analogical" mode of thinking that were thought to constitute a contrasted pair, the former around reason and deduction and the latter around magic and myth. Douglas takes up the challenge of demonstrating that both modes have their own language, daily writing style and high rhetoric. The inferiority of the analogical mode of thought was an acceptable stance until our recent past, Douglas points out. We should accordingly understand Lévy-Bruhl in the context of philosophical thinking around him, for example that of Cassirer and of many others who thought of human history as a process of escaping the analogical mode of thought. Is this standpoint justified, asks Douglas, and on what grounds? Aristotle and Auerbach were guilty of the same offence as Lévy-Bruhl since both referred to that division of thought styles and took a progressist view. However, the denigrated parallelism of the analogical thought may merely represent our predilection for our own mentality. The ring structure of that mode does not lack organisational order, as many might think. Far from that, it tends to encapsulate and reproduce the entire pattern of the structure in each of the parts. Contrary to linear narratives, parallel ones do not lead us towards a final climax. Douglas draws her examples from the structure of the Book of Numbers and the Book of Genesis. She identifies the complexity of their parallelisms and asks: "How could Auerbach take a such a complex structure as an example of the parataxic style, which is supposed to be simple, primitive, and intellectually inept? How can one explain that such a sensitive and competent scholar disregarded the structure of a text that he admired?"; and more generally: "Why do we trust our own knowledge? Why does each one of us possess that trust?"

2.17 Douglas points out that all peoples and cultures are faced with the problem of the indeterminacy of reality. We seem to be aware of the importance of interpretation but this does not mean that we do not employ processes which help ideas take root in our culture. This is in fact necessary because disagreeing on the meaning of facts threatens any society as such and if people want to live together in peace they must share a common knowledge base. That knowledge is inserted into daily experience around which social relations are locked into stability. Practice comes before theory, argues Wittgenstein, and the best demonstration of how this is done appears, according to Douglas, in Bourdieu's *The Logic of Practice*. He masterfully shows how a long series of binary divisions "protect the categories of the universe from all questioning"; their interdependence establishes a mesh of irrefutable proof that arises from all experiences of daily life. Taboos also enforce, albeit negatively, analogical structures. They are non-practices that protect essential categories. The key is of course to have enough sociality concentrated around analogical structures so that it be in the individuals' interest to adhere to dominant analogies. Douglas suggests that Bernstein's "restricted" code corresponds to Bourdieu's description of "familiar language"; it is restricted in the sense that analogies are known, respected and constantly rehearsed. Many things are implicit and self-evident, contrary to the individualised production of meaning in the language of the middle classes and, as Bourdieu had observed for the Berbers ("Imazighen"), little in this organisation of knowledge allows for the construction of reflexiveness and organisation of individual emotions into verbal expression.

2.18 Analogy is not a question of meaning or subtlety, observes Douglas, but an issue of social environments organised either as static and inalterable, or as dynamic, aspirational and, accordingly, mutable. Closed social environments have set positions whilst mutable ones have negotiable arrangements that individuals can undertake. Bernstein supplies a key to these differentiations and to the distinction between analogical and analytic thinking by showing how social conditions give rise to them. Douglas comes back to Bourdieu and to his *Logic of Practice* in order to discuss the reflexiveness of analogical thought styles. What needs to be understood, Douglas powerfully argues, is that the languages of familiarity did not need formal syllogisms and definitions. Analogical and analytic styles are not two different languages but two socially-based modes for the operation of the same language. They offer different opportunities, all of which are highly useful for their social contexts. Douglas concludes with a solemn anthropological hope: "Now that we reject imperialism, we are able to analyse imperialist ideas and we can hope that one day social positions will be acknowledged and classified as appropriate sources for speech and writing modes."

2.19 *Outhwaite* addresses a major gap in sociological literature: the processes and effects of the largest-scale socioeconomic experiment ever conducted, i.e. 'applied socialism'. It is true that sociology in general, and European sociology in particular, has showed strikingly little interest in understanding the transformation of systems, classes and positions in the transition of so many societies towards capitalism. Beyond the neoclassical 'transitology', largely concerned with how well and fast postcommunism turned to capitalism[3], very few works have dealt with the transformation of values, cultures and practices that underlie the partial redistribution of social positions and the processing of the great uncertainties associated with that redistribution[4]. Outhwaite reminds us that Bourdieu, who shortly addressed the question, and everyone with a Marxist theoretical perspective, could vastly benefit from the study of postcommunist transition. Established social position, albeit in a disappearing system, and all forms of Bourdieusian non-economic capital were naturally crucial in occupying positions in the new system. Structural factors in the previous system played a crucial role too; for instance, as Outhwaite remarks, "Soviet and Eastern European firms, with their traditions of vertical integration and self-sourcing of many of their needs, were well placed to shift their activities in creative ways; the name of an enterprise ceased to be much of a guide to what it actually produced." Elites in the form of communist nomenklatura did not hesitate to use criminal ways in order to seize the valuable assets and the high-yielding opportunities, a "cultural adaptation" that should teach us a lot on the underlying premises of middle-class adherence to the State of Law. This point should be considered in parallel with the suggestion that each stratification process starts via individual or group control of social and material resources produced by collective coexistence. In postcommunist conditions, these were State resources and it seems that the mode of distributing power, through the authoritative awarding of privileges, is more permanent than the political and socioeconomic system in which this distribution takes place.

2.20 Another important issue is of course the integration of these 'inheriting' elites with the elites originating in opposition to the communist regimes, a fascinating challenge for the analysis of middle and dominant class formation. The internationalisation of domination adds another aspect to the problem. Outhwaite notes that "[…] the globalisation and/or Europeanisation of Eastern European capitalism means that discussion of class relations necessarily takes on an international dimension which is more familiar in development studies than in the class analysis of advanced industrial societies". This dimension adds further interest to his parallel discussion of postcommunist social transition in Weberian and Bourdieusian terms. Negotiation of relations and social positions is also linked to the readiness of adopting the cultures and operational modes of those foreign classes that have the power to impose such changes as preconditions for access to power, thus as stratifying criteria in their own right. Bourdieu's work forms a useful basis for understanding the continuity behind such changes, a dimension of class whose subtlety sociological analysis could otherwise miss. Beyond putting forward a convincing case in this respect, Outhwaite's contribution leads us to reflect differently on the durability of capitalism as a system of social competition.

2.21 I would like to equally thank all the authors of this issue – classic, established and promising – for accepting to participate in this critical tribute; let me also express my regret that I have not been able to convince John Goldthorpe to offer an article and expand our critical approaches to Bourdieu's work. I would also like to thank the editorial board of SRO for their kind and discreet patience and Denis Duclos who has fertilised my thinking on Bourdieu with his incisive, and sometimes polemical, critique. Not long before the publication of this special issue Mary Douglas left us. She supported the idea from its early beginning and was looking forward to seeing this issue published; I would like to believe that the outcome would have pleased her.

2.22 Finally, a comment on language. Bourdieu has not only written in French but he is a distinctively French social scientist, both in terms of his intellectual training and, most importantly, in terms of his research themes and the impact of his work. It would be paradoxical to disregard in such a context the criteria that currently impose English as the language of an international social science journal. This is why we have chosen to include three contributions in French, the language in which they were originally written. SRO accepted this as part of a reflexivity tribute inspired by Bourdieu's works. We hope that this issue forms the core of a more extensive collective publication, for which we would like to be able to maintain that linguistic diversity.

Notes

[1]Fournier M., La dernière leçon de Pierre Bourdieu au Collège de France, *Sociologie et Sociétés*, vol. XXXIII, no 2, 2002.

[2]I.e. the State system promoting the values of the Republic as opposed to private education, mainly built around the values of the Catholic Church.

[3]An interesting task in itself, but little informative on the formidable opportunity to study the persistence of class aspects as the premises of stratification radically change.

[4]My own work on social uncertainty and insecurity in Europe has taught me the importance and breadth of this gap in literature.